

How to Start and Maintain an Oyster Garden

Step Five: Purchase Supplies

When buying seed, it's important for the oyster gardener to be sure that it comes from a hatchery that has the best available brood stocks. That means oysters with a proven record of good growth and survival in areas where disease is prevalent. While disease tolerant oyster lines have been developed, it is unlikely that a fully disease resistant oyster will ever be discovered.



A bag of 1000 oyster seed of varying sizes. Photo courtesy of TOGA.

Vendors for oyster seed and containment systems change frequently but you should be able to locate one close to you, no matter where you are in Virginia's coastal area. See Reference C on page 20 for Web site addresses for the Tidewater Oyster Gardeners' Association (TOGA) and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF). The Toga Web site gives you 14 vendors in Virginia and 1 in Rhode Island that can be viewed alphabetically or by location. TOGA's site also provides contact information for 70 Master Oyster Gardeners. You may want to contact an MOG near you for advice on the best seed and containment sources, as well as for advice on oyster gardening in general. The CBF Web site gives you 11 suppliers organized by geographic region within Virginia and two, out-of-state mail order suppliers.

What will it cost?

You could spend anywhere from \$60 to \$140 to start your garden. It all depends on the size of seed, the type of containment system you buy and how many oysters you want to grow. For the most up to date information and prices go to the Web sites listed on page 20 under "Lists of Oyster Gardening Suppliers."

A bag of 1000 seed oysters can cost from \$25 - \$60. The larger the seed you buy, the more expensive it will be. Some suppliers will even ship the seed to you.

Your containment system costs will probably be the more expensive part of your garden. On the high end of cost are prefabricated Taylor floats. They can run \$80 to \$115 for the 2'x3'x1' or the 4'x6'x1' floats. Plus, you will have to buy mesh bags for your small oysters. However, if you can build a float yourself, the Taylor float materials should only cost about \$45-\$50. But be careful to construct it properly so that it doesn't sink.

Cages cost from \$30 to \$45. In addition you will need to buy about 6 bags at \$4-6 each. You will start your oysters in 2 of the bags and eventually move them into the other 4 bags as they grow. So if you start with 1000 seed oysters, you'll end up with about 250 oysters in each of the 4 larger bags.

Mesh bags may be the least expensive option. You can purchase them for \$3.50 to \$6.00 each. Or you can buy a \$40 mesh bag kit with one bag having small mesh size for small seed oysters and 5 bags with large mesh size for use as your oysters grow. Each 2'x3' bag will hold 200 harvest-size oysters and you supply the 2 liter plastic bottles to use as floats.

It may cost more to produce oysters in your garden than to buy them at the store, but, don't forget you are adding filter feeders to Virginia's waters and you can go out and harvest your oysters whenever you like!



An assembled oyster cage. Photo courtesy of TOGA.